

Preservation Resources

Review

Museum Curatorship in the National Park Service, 1904-1982 by Ralph H. Lewis. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Curatorial Services Division, Washington, DC, 1993. 396 pp.

Reviewed by Frederick L. Rath, Jr.

There is no one better able to present a detailed history of the development of professional museum curatorship in the Service than Ralph Lewis. He was hired as a museum assistant just prior to the appointment in 1935 of Ned Burns as superintendent of field laboratories in the newly-created Museum Division. Ned was named chief of the division in August 1936, and in the next 17 years—until his death in 1953—through his actions and the dictates he enunciated in his *Field Manual for Museums*, he became known as one of the great pioneer leaders in the profession. He was succeeded by his principal assistant, Ralph Lewis, who quietly and ably stepped into the master's footprints; in a reorganization in 1964, he became chief of the Branch of Museum Operations. He retired in 1971, but since that time, living in Harpers Ferry, he has been a constant observer, volunteer helpmate, and author on Park Service curatorial affairs. His *Manual For Museums* was published by the Service in 1976 and the present publication, conceived in 1978, completes the story of how two men, with their staffs, were able over a 35-year span to put in place one of the most distinguished museum programs in the world and one of the largest. It's a fine story.

Museum Curatorship was 15 years in the making, with too many Park Service personnel to acknowledge here, aiding and abetting Ralph's tireless efforts to research and unravel the complicated story. The first five chapters (220 pages) deal with museum development in the parks to 1982. It is perhaps not surprising that Yosemite and Yellowstone pioneered in establishing collections—flora, fauna, and even minerals—and Casa Grande was displaying archeological specimens long before the Park Service came into being in 1916. Soon thereafter, however, the Secretary of the Interior set the official policy by authorizing both educational and recreational use of the parks, as well as the establishment of museums. By 1919, Director Stephen Mather had named a National Parks Educational Committee and within a few years it could be said that ethnology and history were accepted as secondary subject areas. The museum program began to blossom when Horace Albright became director in 1929 and soon appointed Verne

Chatelain as the first chief historian. In fairly short order at Colonial and then at Morristown, museum planning on a broad scale was underway. The era came to a significant end, for the activity culminated in enactment of the Historic Sites Act of 1935 with a clear legal authority to operate museums.

In the years ahead, with major underwriting by FDR's NRA and its satellites, the Park Service surged forward. Lewis recounts warmly how in 1941 Ned Burns and his colleagues were able to produce the first *Field Manual for Museums*. It was—and still is—a classic statement of how far the Park Service had come in regularizing this facet of its educational mission, the care and handling of its burgeoning collections and their use and interpretation for a public seeking their heritage on the road. Looking behind what the Park Service was doing, Ned Burns summed up the final step, interpretation, for me when he said, "Never overestimate the knowledge of your visitors, but never underestimate their intelligence." I came to know—as Ned did—that in the field you would run across men and women occasionally who had specialized knowledge in depth and then you listened and learned.

The first 15 pages of Chapter Six, "Furnished Historic Structure Museums," interested me particularly because it deals with the period of my involvement with Park Service. In it Ralph Lewis corroborates my own belief that at Morristown, under the direction of Superintendent Elbert Cox and Historian Melvin Weig, the pieces of a new kind of interdisciplinary approach were falling into place. (Charles Hosmer noted this later and wrote knowingly about it in *Preservation Comes of Age*.) What was happening at the Ford Mansion and the Wick House in Morristown and at the Vanderbilt Mansion and the Roosevelt Home in Hyde Park after World War II was that the interdisciplinary approach to the problems of restoring and furnishing Park Service historic houses was being defined. It was exciting to be a small part of it, as I was, and to meet the men and women who were initiating it. And, interestingly enough, the expertise being developed in the Service led almost directly to the eventual formation of the National Trust for Historic Preservation when David Finley, director of the National Gallery, asked for the assistance of Chief Historian Ronald Lee to help solve the problems at Hampton, a great 18th-century mansion at Towson, MD. Finley and Lee, with Horace Albright and George McAneny, were principal catalysts in forming the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings, which in turn directed the movement to establish the National Trust. The leapfrog effect?

Lewis calls collections "the heart of the museum" at the beginning of the next chapter and then offers some stupefying

figures. By 1976 there was a total of 9,701,959 specimens in the parks, an estimated 92.5% archeological and manuscript materials. Since only half of them had been cataloged, a National Catalog was authorized in 1977. There are detailed accounts here of the two major categories of collections, natural resources and cultural resources. And that in turn leads naturally to collection management, which gets full treatment in Chapter Eight where accession policies and procedures, museum records, specimen protection and routine care, and curatorial staffing are discussed.

In the final chapter, "Conservation of Cultural and Scientific Objects," Lewis reviews the two phases of what took place between 1916 and 1982. He proceeds from the empirical phase (1916-1948) to the scientific conservation phase that developed during the next 34 years. In the first phase, observation and experiment proceeded largely from the defining of the work conservators do by Harold Plenderleith of the British Museum Laboratory in his *Preservation of Antiquities* and the pioneering and new standards being developed at the Fogg Museum, Harvard University. Slowly, carefully, the Service began to formulate its program of scientific conservation that is in place to this day.

Historians of the future will have to use this book; they will find that the evidence is documented at the end of each chapter and is bolstered by a comprehensive bibliography and index. *Museum Curatorship in the National Park Service* is not for bedtime reading; it is a stalwart piece of research and thoughtful observation by a man who helped to bring this aspect of the Service program to fulfillment. We have a right to be grateful to Ralph Lewis for giving us this overview.

Historian Fred Rath has contributed several informative and entertaining articles to CRM, including "Reflections on Historic Preservation and the National Park Service: The Early Years" (Vol. 14, No. 4); "Oral History: The Hyde Park Project" (Vol. 16, No. 10); and a review of Roger G. Kennedy's *Rediscovering America* (Vol. 17, No. 1).

Publications

Composition Ornament

The Preservation Assistance Division of the National Park Service announces the release of *Preservation Brief 34: Applied Decoration for Historic Interiors—Preserving Composition Ornament* by Jonathan Thornton and William Adair, FAAR. It describes the history, appearance, and characteristics of this uniquely pliable decorative material that was originally used to simulate the appearance of more expensive wood decoration. The manufacture of

architectural "compo" is described and its history traced in a variety of interior settings from the 18th to late-20th centuries. Guidance is provided to help identify it and prescribe appropriate treatments, depending upon whether the project goal is preservation or restoration. The Brief is available from the Government Printing Office for \$1.50 (stock number: 024-005-01137-4). For further information on ordering Preservation Briefs 1-33 through direct GPO sales or using GPO's convenient standing order service, write Preservation Assistance Division (424), National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127.

Historic Landscapes

The National Park Service is pleased to announce the publication of *Presenting Nature: The Historic Landscape Design of The National Park Service—1916 to 1942*, by Linda Flint McClelland. This study, published by the National Register of Historic Places, was developed primarily to encourage nomination of historic park landscapes of national and state parks to the National Register of Historic Places. The idea for the study came from the growing interest in landscape preservation and the concern that, while significant park buildings and structures were being recognized, the larger landscapes of which they were an integral part were being overlooked. The objective was to develop a national context for identifying, evaluating, and registering the vast number of historic park landscapes influenced by the design ethic developed and practiced by the National Park Service. The largest group of these are areas of national, state, and local parks developed by the CCC under the direction of landscape architects, architects, and engineers of the National Park Service in the 1930s. The initial funding for this study came from a grant from the Horace Albright (now Albright-Wirth) Employee Development Fund of the National Park Foundation, a non-profit organization devoted to supporting National Park Service employees and initiatives.

To order a copy, free of charge, write to Linda McClelland, Interagency Resources Division (413), National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127. A review by Jim Steely, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Texas Historical Commission, will appear in a future issue of *CRM*.

New England Antiquities

The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) announces the revival of its publication *Old-Time New England*, a journal devoted to the architecture, household furnishings, domestic arts, manners and customs, and material culture of the New England people. After a seven-year hiatus, SPNEA plans to recommence publication of the journal in March 1995.

Featuring pictorial, descriptive, and analytic presentations of architecture and artifacts of historical and aesthetic interest, essays on methods of identifying, interpreting, and preserving artifacts, and explorations of social history, regional craftsmanship, and aspects of daily life, *Old-Time New England* constitutes a valuable resource for students of New England and American history and culture, and offers fascinating reading for those interested in regional history, architecture, and antiques.

Old-Time New England is now accepting submissions for the March 1995 issue. Manuscripts must be received by July 15, 1994, for consideration for the March issue. Manuscripts received thereafter will be considered for forthcoming issues. The deadline for receipt of manuscripts for the next issue is December 1, 1994.

For details, write to: Editor, *Old Time New England*, SPNEA, 141 Cambridge Street, Boston, MA 02114.

CAMP

As the nation's only national organization with the dual objectives of military history and historic preservation, the Council on America's Military Past (CAMP) extends an invitation to membership. Representing diverse professions ranging from historians to archeologists, museumologists to architects, engineers to authors, active and retired military of all ranks from four stars to no stripes, genealogists to archivists, and just plain hobbyists, the council's only requirement for membership is an interest in its objectives. Recognition of the role played by the military in the foundation and protection of the nation is the reason for CAMP. Organized at a time that the military and national security and patriotic values generally were in public disfavor, CAMP was and is intended to preserve and disseminate the record of the military's accomplishments.

To receive a descriptive brochure and information on membership, write to CAMP, P.O. Box 1151, Ft. Myer, VA 22211-0151.

NADB

The National Archeological Database (NADB) is a communications network, available 24 hours a day, which provides on-line access to information important to preserving America's archeological heritage. The network, which cites over 100,000 reports of archeological investigations, will soon offer nationwide access to federal excavation permits issued before 1984 and mapping capabilities to display data at state and county levels. NADB is a system for gathering information as well as disseminating it. To keep NADB records current, the National Park Service works in partnership with federal, state, tribal, and local government agencies, professional

societies, and educational and scientific organizations.

For an information brochure about the NADB-Network and technical assistance, contact the NADB program coordinator at the Archeological Assistance Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; 202-343-4101.

National Trust Library Collection

Established in 1986 on the campus of the University of Maryland at College Park, the National Trust for Historic Preservation Library Collection (NTL) serves the nation as a central repository for permanently valuable materials pertaining to historic preservation. The NTL staff has prepared a computerized index to its preservation periodicals; the index is also available in book form and contains 5,400 citations to articles published between 1987 and 1990. In addition, NTL maintains an index to publications generated by the nation's various State Historic Preservation Offices, currently citing approximately 350 records; an index to the National Trust for Historic Preservation *Information* series; and a nationwide index to unpublished historic structure reports and archeological site studies. Each database is continually updated. NTL encourages all preservationists, both individually and collectively, to apprise it of recent studies and publications, and to notify it of the availability of materials of lasting importance. Through the help of a nationwide network of preservationists, NTL will continue to fulfill its role as the country's most significant single source for historic preservation information.

The NTL collection is located in the McKeldin Library, on the campus of the University of Maryland at College Park, and is open to the public by appointment from 9:00 a.m. to 12 noon, and without an appointment from 12 noon to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Due to the special nature of the collection, all NTL materials must be used on site. For further information on the holdings of the NTL, its use, or donations to the collection, contact: The National Trust for Historic Preservation Library Collection; Sally Sims Stokes, Curator; McKeldin Library; University of Maryland at College Park; College Park, MD 20742; 301-405-6320.

US/ICOMOS Special Issue

The US/ICOMOS Specialized Committee on Earthen Architecture has published its second annual newsletter which describes preservation activities in earthen architecture by its members in the United States and abroad. The issue contains a wide variety of information regarding ongoing earthen architectural conservation efforts in research, planning, stabilization and restoration. To obtain a copy, contact US/ICOMOS, Decatur House, 1600 H Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006; Phone: 202-842-1866, Fax: 202-842-1861.